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Towards a Philosophy of Rhythm: Nietzsche's Conflicting Rhythms (Abstract)

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In recent years, theories of rhythm have been proposed by a number of different disciplines, including historical poetics, generative metrics, cognitive literary studies, and evolutionary aesthetics. The wide range of fields indicates the transdisciplinary nature of rhythm as a phenomenon, as well as its complexity, highlighting the degree to which many of the central questions surrounding rhythm remain extraordinarily difficult even to state in terms that can traverse the disciplinary boundaries effortlessly transgressed by rhythm as a phenomenon. In particular, any theory of rhythm, whether in music, dance, sociology, or language, must grapple with two quandaries. First, the precise site of rhythm remains opaque: rhythms occur in, affect, and are produced by all of bodies, cultures, and universals (whether metaphysical or species-physiological). What is the relation between species-wide characteristic, individual body, cultural context, and the history of art making in the experience of rhythm? Second, rhythm is simultaneously a phenomenon of fixed, organizing form and one of dynamic, changing flow. How can rhythm encompass both the measurement of regular recurrences across time and the organizing of temporal phenomena as they unfold?

In this article, I draw on Emile Benveniste and Henri Meschonnic to elucidate these quandaries or conflicts before turning to Friedrich Nietzsche's work on rhythm. I argue that Nietzsche's work with rhythm provides a historically situated model for how we might continue to take the questions and conflicts within rhythm seriously, rather than privileging an abstract and universally applicable theory of rhythm. This model is especially crucial for our own historical moment, when cultural-political emphasis on science and technology at the expense of aesthetics devalues all insights not presented in the form of countable data points or empirically testable facts. Nietzsche is, of course, one of the great critics of positivist-scientific epistemologies, part of a long tradition questioning the naturalness of natural-scientific paradigms and alerting us to the metaphors at play even in the ›hard sciences‹. I use rhythm as one paradigmatic place to resist the importation of scientific thought into discussions of language, literature, and culture. I show how Nietzsche's writings on rhythm prove illuminating for contemporary understandings of rhythm because the tensions in his work are shaped by the quandaries inherent to rhythm that I have used Benveniste and Meschonnic to elaborate, namely the question of rhythm's site as individual, cultural, or universal, and the conflict between rhythm as form and as flow. The question of the site of rhythm appears in Nietzsche's discussions of Greek and Latin meters both in his philological works, in his aphorisms, and in his letters: on the one hand, he argues that Greek and Latin metrical and rhythmic resources are irrevocably lost to modern cultures (indicating that rhythm is a product of culture), while on the other, he emphasizes the impact of rhythm on the body and offers advice for replicating Ancient metrical and rhythmic techniques (suggesting that rhythm is based on physiological universals). And the conflict between flow and form appears as Nietzsche praises both the productive constraint created by large-scale, architectonic, or macro-formal rhythms and the freedom from such constraint enabled by small-scale, leitmotiv-based, or micro-formal rhythms.

The conflicts in Nietzsche's work between the loss and recovery of Ancient rhythms and between rhythm as small scale freedom vs. large scale constraint thus represent one particular unfolding of the dilemmas for rhythmical theory worked out by Benveniste and Meschonnic. The various modern disciplines engaged with rhythm will answer different sets of these questions in different ways. Most practitioners of, e. g., evolutionary aesthetics, neuroaesthetics, or cognitive poetics would no doubt contend that they are using the tools of the natural sciences to investigate long-standing humanistic inquiries. Nietzsche, as a critic of his own era's scientific positivism who allows tensions inherent in these questions to remain open in his own work, is an ideal interlocutor with whom to ask whether even the adoption of these tools ends up placing excessive faith in natural-scientific paradigms and undercutting other—affective, bodily, metaphorical, poetic, etc.—ways of knowing, as I demonstrate briefly in the examples of evolutionary aesthetics and generative metrics.

Because Nietzsche leaves open the conflicts over rhythm's site and its qualities as form or flow, he can use individual bodily experience to make physiological arguments about the effects of rhythm on culture and vice versa: Nietzsche takes his bodily response to be an index of cultural values inherent to rhythmical practices. The particular values that Nietzsche critiques shift across his career—early on he condemns German musical and poetic rhythms for being too rigid, while later he sees them as pathologically heightening affect and emotion. In both cases, detrimental rhythmic practices lead to detrimental bodily practices and to the degeneration of culture, while rhythmic practices work as a bodily and cultural corrective. In his critiques of German forms and praises of Greek forms, and in the moments in which he brings them together, Nietzsche thus asserts the complex interrelation of culture, body, and history.

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